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ABSTRACT

The document reviews literature on the effects of culture shock and suggests reasons that anthropological writings seldom deal with the subject. Definitions of culture shock begin with the writings of anthropologist Kalvero Oberg, who first introduced the term in the mid 1950s. Oberg wrote that culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. Other authors note that it is a massive psychic reaction creating stress responses of frustration, anxiety, helplessness, irritation, fear, and homesickness. Culture shock has been described in terms of stages and curves. Oberg's four stages include fascination with novelty, hostility, beginning of adjustment, and acceptance of the customs of the country. Several studies have attempted to correlate culture shock with occupational, situational, experiential, and personality variables. The major occupational groups studied include technical assistants, foreign students in the United States, Peace Corps volunteers, and tourists. Several reasons exist for the lack of anthropologists' descriptions of their own experiences with culture shock: the tradition emphasizes publication of the results of fieldwork with little emphasis on the method: by the time field notes are developed into publications, most fieldworkers have gone through adjustment and are at their normal level of emotional equilibrium; and the pain of culture shock is offset by the challenge and excitement of fieldwork. (Author/KC)

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# CULTURE SHOCK

## and Anthropological Fieldwork

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There are few more vivid descriptions of "culture shock" in the anthropological literature than Napoleon Chagnon's account of his first day in the field.

> "We arrived at the village...In just a few moments I was to meet my first Yąnomamö, my first primitive man...Would they like me? This was important to me; I wanted them to be so fond of me that they would adopt me into their kinship system and way of life, because I had heard that successful anthropologists always get adopted by their people...I felt into my back pocket to make sure that my notebook was still there and felt personally more secure when I touched it...
>
> The entrance to the village was covered over with brush and dry palm leaves...
>
> I looked up and gasped when I saw a dozen burly, naked, filthy, hideous men staring at us down the shafts of their drawn arrows! Immense wads of green tobacco were stuck between their lower teeth and lips making them look even more hideous, and strands of dark-green slime dripped or hung from their noses. We arrived at the village while the men were blowing a hallucinogenic drug up their noses...I just stood there holding my notebook, helpless and pathetic. Then the stench of the decaying vegetation and filth struck me and I almost got sick. I was horrified. What sort of a welcome was this for a person who came to live with you and learn your way of life, to become friends with you?" (Chagnon 1968:4-5).

Despite this inauspicious beginning, Chagnon stayed 19 months with the Yąnomamö. Apart from this account of his first meeting and a brief description of his strenuous efforts to stay alive and conduct ethnographic research, he makes virtually no references to himself or his "management of culture shock".

Problem

One of the most interesting characteristics of anthropology is the extent to which anthropologists relegate themselves and their personal experiences to the dim recesses of their publications. A recent systematic review of more than 26,000 pages of ethnographic description of 68 preliterate societies worldwide yielded no more than a handful of fleeting references to the authors' reactions or adjustments to the cultures they studied (Barker, 1980). There was not a single reference to culture shock in any of the 112 sources consulted.

This omission cannot be explained by a lack of awareness of the phenomenon of culture shock on the part of anthropologists. The term "culture shock" was

first introduced, by the anthropologist Kalvero Oberg, in the mid 1950s (Oberg 1958), and passing references to culture shock are found in standard manuals of ethnographic field methods (Williams 1967:15) and autobiographical descriptions of fieldwork (Spindler 1970).

It is hypothesized that a conjunction of several factors minimizes references to culture shock in ethnographic literature: professional traditions regarding publication, personality characteristics of anthropologists, role activities associated with field methods of participant observation, and the elapse of time between return to the home culture and the drafting of scientific reports. A broad but far from comprehensive review of the literature pertaining to culture shock and stress response suggests that anthropologists' handling of culture shock, minimizing its importance, is predicted from studies of other occupational groups.

## CULTURE SHOCK

### Definitions

Culture shock, according to Oberg, who was addressing technical assistance professionals in Brazil, is "a malady which afflicts most of us to some degree. We might almost call culture shock an occupational disease of many people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad." Other authors, while concurring with this estimate of high prevalence, have described culture shock as a hazard rather than a disease (Uncapher 1977:4). The anthropologist George Spindler, for instance, asserted "It is an occupational hazard and we have all suffered from it at one time or another" (Spindler 1970:299).

Most authors have been in fundamental agreement over the definition of the term. Oberg wrote, "Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs or cues include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life" (Oberg 1958:1). After a brief sojourn in India,

Barbara Gallatin Anderson defined it as "the massive psychic reaction which takes place within the individual plunged into a culture vastly different from his own. The 'shock' imagery suggests some resultant failure in appropriate response mechanisms, a derangement of control related to psychic injury or incapacitation - a neurotic condition" (Anderson 1971:1121). Adler defined culture shock as "primarily a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one's own culture, to new cultural stimuli which have little or no meaning" (Adler 1975:13).

An important study by Spradley and Phillips (1972) related culture shock to a model of stress. Threatening stimuli, both sensory and symbolic, are stressors, producing a tension or disequilibrium as a state of stress, inferred from the presence of physiological, psychological, social, or cultural indicators known as stress responses. Employing a method derived from that of Holmes and Rahe (1967) the authors of the Social Readjustment Rating Scale, Spradley and Phillips developed a list of 33 cultural readjustment items. Their sample of returned Peace Corps Volunteers, Chinese foreign students, and U.S. students who had no intercultural experience were asked to rate the magnitude of readjustment required for each item in relation to an arbitrary value of 500 assigned to the "type of food eaten". A comparison of overall ranking of items in the three samples suggested that neither intercultural experience nor common cultural background was a decisive factor in appraising readjustment. Differences in ranking also suggested that readjustment is more difficult in those areas where the range of appropriate behavior is less restricted in the new cultural environment. This study suggests that there are universal stressors common to all cultures, as well as important variations in the cultural definition of stress.

The literature on culture shock is replete with references to physiological, psychological, and interpersonal indicators of stress responses. Oberg's list made and impressive beginning: frustration and anxiety, a feeling of helplessness, irritation, fear, and "that terrible longing to be back home".

One of the most revealing accounts of prolonged culture shock is contained in the diary of Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish physicist who was interned in the Trobriand Islands during World War I and subsequently became one of the most eminent anthropologists of this century. Two selections from this diary, published 25 years after his death, may suffice to indicate his physical and emotional state in the midst of his fieldwork.

> "Subjectively: over-all condition such that I need narcotics but I have an aversion to them. As usual, my narcotic is a trashy novel. In the morning (was awakened by conch shells, a new boat begging for gifts) went to the beach; after breakfast I read Maud Diver. Finished around 12, and felt so broken and sleepy (in need of arsenic?) that I lay down and dozed until 3 p.m." (Malinowski 1967:241).

> "Over-all mood: strong nervous excitement and intellectual intensity on the surface, combined with inability to concentrate, superirritability and supersensitiveness of mental epidermis and feeling of permanently being exposed in an uncomf. position to the eyes of a crowded thoroughfare: an incapacity to achieve inner privacy." (Malinowski 1967:253).

Barbara Gallatin Anderson chronicled a very different stress response. She survived culture shock, she wrote, because she was able to draft an interim framework of cultural support, a hybrid prop that combined old cues from her native culture and conventionalized supportive elements of the new culture. Keeping a record of her dreams, she noted that in the first phase of adjustment she dreamed of old acquaintances whe had not thought of in years. After more than a month in India, families began entering the dreams, but "almost shyly". In the final phase, "the dream world resumed its old order except that the spectrum of personages and settings had widened" (Anderson 1971:1122).

## Stages and Curves

Anderson's creation of a hybrid prop during her sojourn raises an issue which has received a great deal of attention in the study of culture shock: the temporal and developmental phases through which it unfolds. Oberg noted four stages: (1) a honeymoon stage of fascination with novelty, (2) a hostile and aggressive reaction, (3) the beginning of adjustment, and finally (4) acceptances of the customs of the country as just another way of living.

Other investigators, in what might be called the Alphabet School, suggested that the pattern of intercultural adjustment resembled a "V" (Lysgaard 1955), a "J" (Lambert 1966), or a "W" (Gullahorn and Gullahorn 1963). One of the most impressive versions of this pattern, used by the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) as an orientation document for Americans going to Saudi Arabia, charts a rise in excitement reaching a peak after two weeks in country, followed by a steady decline through the third month, then returning to normal in the sixth month.

The "W" curve suggested by the Gullahorns entailed the significant observation that "post-return adjustment problems" arose when the sojourner typically found himself out of phase with his home culture on his return. George Spindler, an eminent anthropologist who has conducted a great deal of fieldwork, wrote:

> "[The] only significant culture shock we have experienced has been upon return to the comforts and responsibilities of our own society. Every time we have returned from fieldwork, no matter where in the field, we have experienced feelings of futility, despondency, and a haze of indecisiveness. After a few weeks we adjust once more to the haunting, ever-present feeling that life is a crisis and to the inhumanity and sham so pervasive in our society" (Spindler 1970:299).

Life Shock and Role Shock

Some investigators have distinguished "culture shock" from other forms of dramatic emotional experiences in intercultural settings. Williams suggested that anthropologists gain some exposure to emergency medicine before embarking on fieldwork.

> "These experiences can prepare you for the "life shock" to be encountered in a remote society as you face the processes of life, birth and death, mutilation, ulcerated sores, worms being vomited through the nostrils, and so on. These experiences cannot prepare you for the "culture shock" which results from living closely with people whose cultural categorizations of experience will be totally alien in many ways. Culture shock should not be confused with life shock...Culture shock is an experience that can only be dealt with in the field on the basis of the situation and your perceptions of your own culture and the local culture" (Williams 1967:15-16).

Role shock, as defined by Byrnes in relation to American technical assistants abroad, are

> "the frustrations and stresses associated with such discrepancies as between what a technical assistant views as the ideal role for himself and the actual role to be abroad or between the role he expects to play and the role he actually plays" (Byrnes 1966:96).

Correlates of Culture Shock

Many of the studies of culture shock have attempted to correlate it with occupational, situational, experiential, and personality variables. The major occupational groups studied have been technical assistants (Arensberg and Niehoff 1964; Byrnes 1966; Cleveland, Mangone and Adams 1960; Goodenough 1963; Lambert 1966); American scholars abroad (Lysgaard 1955); Foreign students in the U.S. (Veroff 1963); Peace Corps Volunteers (Smith, Fawcett, Ezekiel and Roth 1963); and tourists (Cort and King 1979). Psychological studies have characteristically emphasized adaptive responses to stress (Adler, 1975; Anderson 1971; Caudill 1958; Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry 1958). Wintrob, in one of the closest examinations of stress in anthropological fieldwork, identified a "dysadaptation syndrome" composed of a "conflict of involvement", "conflict of commitment" and "conflict of return". In personality structure, eminent anthropologists "showed an early concern with the social status of the family and with interpersonal relations. They tended to be independent thinkers and high achievers with a lively interest in, but a certain detachment from, people" (Wintrob 1969:74).

Culture Schock Among Ethnologists

Why have so few references to culture shock appeared in the anthropological works? The literature on culture shock reviewed here provides the basis for a few tentative explanations.

It seems likely that at least one extraneous factor has operated to minimize discussions of culture shock experienced during and after fieldwork: a tradition of publication of the results of fieldwork with comparatively little emphasis on method. This tradition, while extraneous to culture shock per se, is a direct

outgrowth of the nature of fieldwork and the method employed. Participant observation, requiring the fieldworker to be simultaneously fully engaged in, and detached from, the society s/he studies, may paradoxically expose the anthropologist to a serious hazard (especially among "primitive" people such as the Yanomamö or Trobriand Islanders) and provide him with the mechanisms for adaptive response. Oberg's advice for coping with culture shock was to become more actively involved with the local culture. This is quite unnecessary advice for anthropological fieldworkers; their sole reason for undertaking fieldwork is to gain firsthand familiarity with another culture.

The "role shock" reported for technical assistants (Byrnes 1966) has seldom been a major problem for anthropologists. Their troubles, when they have occurred, seem to be less a matter of conflict between ideal and actual than conflict between the actual role and informants' perceptions of them. Suspicion of foreigners in general, and anthropologists in particular, and accusations of being a spy, government agent, or supporter of an enemy faction have been directed toward anthropologists so frequently that they seem to be nearly universal. However much a hostile environment might impede research, it does not necessarily confront anthropologists with conflict over their own role.

The time frame of anthropological publications also plays a role in diminishing attention to culture shock. By the time field notes are developed into publications, most fieldworkers have probably passed through the trough of the "readjustment U" and are at or near their normal level of emotional equilibrium.

From my own experience, the pain of acute culture shock lingers in the memory but is heavily overlaid by the challenge and excitement of fieldwork and the emotional and personal growth it fosters. Anthropologists are certainly not blessed with immunity to the hazard of culture shock, which is, after all, but one of several they face. But the qualities of detachment and impartial

observation required by this profession has enabled them to surmount their intrapsychic conflicts sufficiently to get on with the business of investigating other cultures.

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